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ON

ERRONEOUS VIEWS

OF

DEATH.

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ERRONEOUS VIEWS OF DEATH.

Christianity was designed to introduce into the world new views and feelings concerning death. We seem to see its character and office typified in the visit of Jesus to the house of Mary and Martha, on occasion of the death of their brother. It was a house of affliction. Wailing and lamentation were heard in it, as they are, at one time or another, in all the dwellings of this world. But our blessed Saviour approached it in a calm consciousness that he was commissioned with a doctrine and clothed with a power that would triumph over death; that death, in fact, was not the end nor the interruption of existence; that death indeed was only death in appearance, while in reality the spirit's life is progressive, ever continued, immortal. What less do his words import, than the annunciation to the world of this new view of mortality? 'I am the resurrection and the life: he that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live: and whosoever liveth and believeth in me, shall *never* die'—shall die not, at all, forever! The apostles, in like manner, evidently considered themselves as commissioned to teach new views of death. They taught

the christian converts to 'sorrow not as others who had no hope.' They represented the coming of Christ as designed to 'deliver those, who through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage.'

The severity of this bondage in the ancient world is sufficiently apparent from its funeral customs, and the whole tenor of its writings, and from the very terms by which they represented death as the great calamity of human existence. That language which has conveyed to us the largest portion of ancient literature contains more than thirty epithets, all indicative of the deepest dejection and dread, which were familiarly and constantly applied to this event. Death was denominated the terrible, the mournful, the inexorable, the insatiable. It was cold, cruel, bitter, merciless death. It was represented as deaf to the cries of mortals, unpitying to their miseries. It was the dire necessity, the dark day, the fatal calamity, the iron sleep, the eternal night. Imagination can scarcely conceive of anything more appalling than the scenes of lamentation to which this event gave rise among heathen nations; which came to be a matter of custom and form indeed, but which could never have been a matter of custom and form without having originated in the most horrible ideas of the reality. In the houses of the deceased, for days together, their relations set up the most dismal wailings and outcries of grief. They upbraided the very dead with ingratitude and cruelty for leaving them; so unreasonable and violent was their sorrow. Nor can we easily blame them, if we consider their actual and effective belief. Heaven was to them scarcely more than a dream of poetry. The future world was a world of shadows. In that dim and solemn

land of vision a train of unsubstantial phantoms passed before their eyes; but no living thought or feeling was there — the termination of life was the end of all reality. If it were so, indeed; if this conscious being were to cease at death; if every cherished thought and feeling, which we grasp with all the strength of our souls, were doomed to utter extinction; if the venerated and the loved were to be lost beyond recovery; if all this were true, human nature could not refuse to its sad fate the tribute of inconsolable sorrow. If all this were true, we might justly say, — Speak not to us of consolation — there *is* no consolation; there is no support for such a lot; nothing but dulness can bear it; nothing but indifference can tolerate it, and nothing but idiocy, we were ready to say, could be indifferent to it.

But 'thanks be to God, who giveth us the victory' over these awful and overwhelming anticipations. Christianity, we repeat, was designed to introduce into the world new views of death and futurity.

But in this, as in several other respects, we apprehend, that it has made as yet but a feeble impression upon the mass of those who have received it. We have not yet partaken of the cheerfulness, tranquillity, and triumph of him, who 'has abolished death, and brought life and immortality to light in the gospel.' We have not so 'lived and believed' in Jesus, as triumphantly to feel that we 'shall never die!' There is more, we are tempted to say, of heathen despondency and dread among us, than of christian hope and trust.

Indeed, the usual treatment of the subject of death is one, as we apprehend, which is scarcely in accordance with the spirit of the Christian religion. The place which

the fear of death occupies in the religious emotions of multitudes, is one which Christianity by no means assigns to it. A consideration of this event, a dread of it, an activity awakened by this dread, a mournful countenance when it is mentioned, and tears shed at a funeral, with many form too large a part of the whole sum and evidence of their piety. To think of death is too often considered as the very beginning of religion; to prepare for it as the very business of religion; and to pass safely through that great ordeal, as the very end of it. Surely, the great object of our religion is not to make us ready for some temporary exigency, nor to meet one dreadful event or moment, but to prepare for the sublime happiness and glory of an immortal life. This glorious aim would justly inspire, cheer, and elevate the soul; but to fix its attention too much upon one point in time, however serious, interesting, and trying in our moral progress and account — thus to fix the attention upon one point of dreadful apprehension, must narrow, depress, and darken the whole noble work of religious endeavor, faith, and fidelity. What effect this tendency of religious sentiment has had, both upon the prevailing religion and irreligion of the times, is a very serious and interesting inquiry, but one which we cannot now pursue much into detail, beyond the hints that will naturally arise in the prosecution of the subject. We will only observe for the present, that mistaken and exaggerated ideas of the evil of death tend evidently to prevent the calm and settled expectation of dying, and rational and just views of the preparation for it. They are fitted to make the impression, that, to be prepared to die, we need some qualification analogous to so dreadful an event; that we need a

state of mind altogether unusual, altogether beyond the simple tenor of a good life, altogether different from the calm and conscientious performance of our common duties. Thus these ideas of death tend to resolve religion into a kind of unnatural excitement or overwhelming agitation. They also occasion the world infinite unhappiness; and, what is worse, an unhappiness closely associated with religion. That bondage through fear of death, from which Christianity was intended to relieve us, still lays its iron yoke upon the timid, the thoughtful, and the anxious; while to the careless multitude, who need to be impressed, an image is presented, which is at once the more terrific and the more useless, because they 'cannot discern the form thereof,' and can give it no steadfast attention.

We must also express our apprehension, that this subject has not always received a proper treatment from the pulpit. Death, it may be, has not been spoken of, in that calm and temperate, though solemn manner, that becomes the christian preacher. It may have been sometimes the argument of his impatience or his displeasure. It may have been made the occasion for eloquence or declamation, when it should have been of calm instruction, or sober and wise admonition. He who regards death as the greatest of calamities, as the most terrible thing that can befall us, has not yet learned Christianity. Sin is worse; odious and besotting vice is worse; and, to a good man, there may be many things in life that are worse than death; especially inaction, unprofitableness, and to disgrace his sacred calling. He who is ever resorting to this subject as a last argument, and on all occasions presenting it to terrify men into their duty, is

yet in the childhood of the christian life, if not among the weak and beggarly elements of a still earlier dispensation.

We must also venture to question much that often passes around the beds of the dying. The last scene should be as far as possible calm and quiet. The infirmity of human nature, the agonies of friendship in such an hour we would speak of with indulgence; but it should be remembered, that it is our duty, as far as possible, by our resignation and fortitude to sustain the sufferer, that we should not add to the last solemn trial of the sinking spirit the disturbing influence of violent agitation or clamorous grief. He who walks with his friend down that valley of shadows has need to do it with a sustained demeanor, with a calm aspect, with a firm step, with a sympathy full of human gentleness, with a purity full of divine and immortal hope. Above all, religion should not come to the scene of a death-bed, to urge, as a matter of course, its questions or its formalities. Let it speak its holy words, or rest in its holy silence of faith and prayer; but the dying hour is no time for intricate casuistry. Friendship may indeed whisper its anxious inquiry; but formality should speak nothing. Abstruse questions of faith or of experience should not then be agitated; still less should there be such stress laid, as with surprising frequency is done, upon the question, whether the dying man is 'willing to die.' No inquiry could be more unsatisfactory as a test of character; and, indeed, it avails nothing but to spread among the living the false impression, that a preparation for another life is a willingness, when it is unavoidable, to leave this. The reply of the pious and learned President Dwight to all such questions

contains a volume of instruction on this subject. 'My life,' he said to his inquiring friends, 'my life must answer for me.' Neither with technical questions then, nor yet with any indispensable formalities, does religion approach the dying hour. Is there no prayer but that which is formal, loud, and vociferous? Can those who stand around the dying bed, if they are ever capable of prayer, fail, in the silence of their grief, in the extremity of their impotence, to lift up their hearts to God? In that scene, where 'reality is dealing with us,' set forms should not, uncalled for, intrude themselves. To hear, as we have sometimes heard, loud and agonizing voices of prayer, that startled and shocked into temporary consciousness the sinking and bewildered senses of an expiring mortal, has struck us with a horror, that overcame our awe even at death, and seemed to turn the solemnities of dissolution into sacrilegious disorder and confusion. So would we not have our own departure marked; but we would that stillness — where all pray in silence, where the affections of the spirit only move in the hushed atmosphere of death, where the soul breathes its unutterable thoughts — that stillness should settle down upon that last scene that is to usher us into the world of spirits.

But it is time that we should enter more formally upon our design in bringing this subject before our readers, which is, to consider some of those prevailing views of death, which are either erroneous, or which, being just, are nevertheless, through our want of christian faith, suffered to occasion more distress and despondency than they ought. This discrimination of views that are wrong, or of views, which, though right, are suffered to exert a wrong influence upon our feelings, will mark the division

of the subject, which will govern us in what we have now to offer.

We shall speak of this subject, not without solemnity and the tenderness due to a theme so affecting — of these we can scarcely fail — but we shall not speak of it with an awe that forbids us to reason upon it. We shall speak of death as those, who, God helping, do not fear it with any excessive and unreasonable dread. We believe that it is the great course of nature, the appointment of God, a wise and good appointment, and that it is to be met with pious submission, calmness, and trust. We believe in One, who has destroyed 'the power of death;' who has come to deliver us from this very fear that has struck so deep a horror into the world, who has unfolded to us the bright and exalted hope of an endless and blessed life.

The dread which is felt of this event has manifested itself in many popular impressions of the most erroneous and indefensible, as well as painful, character.

We call death 'the king of terrors,' and in the conceptions of the body of mankind it is clothed with every terrific attribute. In the excess of fear, their imagination bodies it forth as an actual being. They speak of a person being 'struck with death;' as if there were some dread power that ruled over the last hour of mortal existence. Even this popular phraseology, though it may scarcely be thought to indicate any error to which reflecting minds are liable, is not unworthy of a moment's attention, in connexion with the errors that are prevailing on this subject. Death is the gradual exhaustion of our faculties, the sinking away of the powers of animal life, till they finally cease to act and to be. Now this

process may be hastened or retarded; may have its progress and its different stages; one power after another may yield — the faculty of speech, of hearing, of motion; but to fix on one particular moment rather than another, and to say that *now* the deceased person is 'struck with death,' is to use language without any foundation in philosophy or support from observation. There is no power — there may be precursors indeed, which the experienced may descry with greater or less certainty — but there is no power, that at any one moment strikes a fatal blow; that fastens a hold upon its victim, from which it may not be shaken; that sets its mark upon the diseased frame, as it were the mark of destiny: but 'where there is life there is hope,' and from any state of exhaustion the sinking faculties may rise to a briefer or a longer continuance of life. It is not, in fine, by some mysterious harbinger, that death announces its coming. All decay is but dying; all disease is a progress towards death; every beating pulse is wearing away the channels of life; every breath of the heaving bosom is preparing for the time when it shall breathe no more.

There prevails also an erroneous or an exaggerated idea of many of the circumstances that attend the dying hour.

In particular, it is thought that this final event passes with some dreadful visitation of unknown agony over the parting sufferer. It is imagined that there is some strange and mysterious reluctance in the spirit to leave the body; that it struggles long to retain its hold, and is at last torn with violence from its mortal tenement; and in fine, that this conflict between the soul and the body greatly adds to the pangs of dissolution. But it may be

justly presumed, from what usually appears, that there is no particular nor acute suffering; not more than is often experienced in life; nay, rather, that there is less, because the very powers of suffering are enfeebled, the very capacities of pain are nearly exhausted. Death is to be regarded rather as a sleep than an acute sensation, as a suspension rather than a conflict of our faculties. Our Saviour once said in relation to this event, 'Our friend Lazarus sleepeth.' The martyr Stephen, we are told 'fell asleep,' though he died amidst the blows and shouts of murderers. And the scripture denominates the pious dead, 'those who sleep in Jesus.' Death is the sleep of the weary. It is repose, the body's repose, after the busy and toilsome day of life.

We have all witnessed perhaps the progress of this change; and what was it? Let our senses and our understanding answer; and not our imagination. What was it, but gradually diminishing strength, feeble utterance, failing perception, and total insensibility? The change, as it passed before us, may have been attended with accidental circumstances of mental experience or bodily sensation; but the change itself, death considered as an event, was only a gradual decline and extinction of the powers of life. This is all which we saw, or could know, as necessarily belonging to this crisis in the progress of our being. And yet, from this ignorance, we allow ourselves to be troubled by the phantoms of agitating conjecture. We imagine, and indeed it is common to say, that because 'no one has returned to tell us what it is to die,' there must be some mysterious and peculiar sensation, some awful physical experience attending it. But we see nothing, we see indications of nothing, and we ought not to presume anything of this nature.

Neither are we to presume that death arouses the mind, in the last moments of its earthly existence, to the keenest attention, or to the most intense action of its powers. The subject, when distinctly contemplated beforehand, may do so; it may often do so in the midst of life; and well were it, if it far more frequently aroused us to do in season the work of life. All we wish to say, is — and we wish to say it to preclude all appeals at once to mysterious fear and unfounded hope — that there is no peculiar, no fearful nor hopeful activity of mind amidst the solemnities of dissolution; that, in most cases there is no activity. It is probable, that the exhausted faculties usually sink to their mortal repose as they do to nightly sleep; and that the convulsive struggles which are sometimes witnessed, are often as unconscious, as those with which we sink to the slumbers of evening rest.

Nor, when the veil of delirium is spread over the mortal hour, can we regard it as the evil that it is often thought to be. It has seemed to us rather, in many cases, as a friendly veil, drawn by the hand of nature over what would otherwise be the agonies of separation, over the anguish that the parent would feel at leaving children orphans and destitute, or that the friend would feel in saying farewell to those who were dearest upon earth. Delirium often interposes, we believe, by the kind providence of God, where nature would be too weak, or faith too infirm for the trial.

Nor yet is there anything but fancy in what is sometimes said of the loneliness of the last hour. To the selfish and the bad, and in proportion as they possess

this character, there is indeed solitude in death, and it may then be doubly felt. But to them there is solitude also in life; solitude in the chamber of sickness, in the hour of retired meditation, nay, and it is oftentimes deeply felt in the throng of society. If we deserve to have friends, they are with us in death as truly as in life; so long as we are conscious of anything earthly, we are conscious of their presence. It may sustain and soothe us, till the last moment of our stay on earth. 'I walked with her,' — said one who laid down the remains of a beloved companion in a distant land — 'I walked with her down the valley of shadows; I wiped the cold damps of death from her forehead; and saw her ascend to the mansions of the blessed!'

But we must hasten briefly to consider some of the errors, that relate, not to the mode or circumstances, but to the nature, the essential character of this solemn event.

When our Saviour says, 'He that liveth and believeth in me, shall never die,' he adds, 'believest thou this?' The question might still be put to multitudes even in a Christian land, and, we doubt not, with the strongest implication of their unbelief. They do not believe it. Death is regarded as the extinction, rather than as the continuance of being. Whatever the words of our theology may say, the real impression upon most minds is, that death sunders almost all the ties that united us to our former existence; that it changes not only our state, but our nature; that the soul, as it travels to the 'undiscovered country,' is passing beyond the borders of all that it has known, and sought, and valued. We are apt to feel, as if on the passage from life we parted with all that our thoughts had familiarized and our affections

cherished. But is not this an error? We take with us — so to speak — our thinking and conscious selves; and it is no vanity, but a simple truth, to say, in a very important sense, that ourself is our all; for it embraces all our mental acquisitions and attachments, our joys and hopes, our attainments of piety, our treasures of knowledge, all elevated and holy contemplations that we may have indulged in, all our habits of thought and feeling that are estimable and pure, all that is precious in happiness, all that is sacred in memory; and the record of all this death will not erase, but will only impress upon it the seal of perpetuity. It has not erased these things, we may believe, from the venerated and pious minds that have gone before us. The dead, — the departed, should we rather say, — are connected with us by more than the ties of memory. The love that on earth yearned towards us is not dead; the kindness that gladdened us is not dead; the sympathy that bound itself with our fortunes is not dead, nor has it lost its fervor, surely, in the pity of an angel. No; if our Christian guides speak truly, it still yearns towards us, it would still gladden us. It still melts in tenderness over our sorrows. The world of spirits — we know not where it is, whether far or near; but it may as well, for all that we can understand, be near to us, as far distant; and in that fervent love, which knows nothing of change or distance or distinction, it is forever near us. Our friend, if he be the same and not another being — our friend, in whatever world, in whatever sphere, is still our friend. The ties of every virtuous union are, like the virtue which cements them, like the affections of angels, like the love of God which binds them to the eternal throne, immortal.

The evil of making this wide separation, this violent disruption of the present from the future, as well as of other prevailing views of death, is in many ways great. Our thoughts do not easily pass to live in the future, or to draw from it the motives of action. Our theological views of this subject, our contemplations of futurity, are too much like the ancient poetic dreams of an Elysian land and a Tartarean region, visionary and ineffectual. There is a fearful retribution, there is a sublime beatitude, we admit; but our conceptions of both are vague and unreal; and our fear does not deter us from sin, and our hope does not allure us to purity and heaven. Between us and our future recompense we look upon death as 'a great gulf fixed,' and it cuts off the communication of our thoughts. Between the good and the bad a great gulf is fixed indeed, but not between us and the departed. Death is not that gulf; yet we so regard it. We do not sufficiently consider it as a stage, a necessary stage in the progress of being; as a natural passage from the childhood to the maturity of our existence. We are deterred too from the thoughts of futurity, by the imaginary glooms and mysteries of the entrance to it. Even the most attractive ideas of a future life, even a spiritual relish for its joys, and a conscience free from alarms, could scarcely overcome our reluctance to so fearful and dismal an approach to it. We could hardly think of home, or welcome the prospect of admission there, if we must pass to it through unknown conflicts and woes, if we could reach it only by braving the horrors of shipwreck, if we could gain its threshold only by rushing over the burning ruins of a conflagration.

Again; death is commonly regarded as a visitation

of God's wrath, as the fruit and punishment of sin. We do not forget the language of scripture on this subject; that 'death entered into the world by sin, and so death passed upon all men, for that all have sinned.' It is to be remembered however, that in many passages where death is said to be the fruit of sin the word death is used figuratively; that mortality is not meant, but misery. This may be seen in the whole of that account which is given of Paul's experience, and reasonings in the seventh and eighth chapters of the Epistle to the Romans; and in other instances. And upon the text before quoted it has been justly argued, that the death which 'entered by sin,' is not the specific calamity of being mortal, but all the evil brought upon us by sin, including whatever is evil in mortality itself. That all this is meant by the word death, we say, has been argued from the circumstance, that it is set in contrast with all the benefits derived from the interposition of our Saviour. As these benefits include more than mere continuance of life, so, it is contended, the contrasted evil which sin is said to introduce cannot be death to the body merely, but rather death to the soul; that is, misery, fear, disquietude and gloom.* And it might be still more strongly urged, with reference to this point, that, if mortality were the specific and only evil meant in that passage, it is said to be removed by the interposition of our Saviour. This is the very point which we are laboring to establish. Jesus Christ has abolished death, and brought life and immortality to light in the gospel. He has presented new views of mortality. He has taught us, that it is the

* I. B Koppe, in Rom. V. 12.

death of the body only; that the good man, that the spirit of goodness which is in him, that the intrinsic and intellectual being, 'shall never die.'

We are not however anxious to deny, for it is obviously true, that sin has given a complexion to this event; that it has, to a certain extent, connected pain, and doubt, and gloom with mortality. In some respects we can see this influence. Sin, which partly consists in the undue indulgence of the body, has made all our diseases more severe and painful. Sin too has clouded and darkened the mind, and filled it with inquietude and fear. Sin then, we repeat, has given a complexion to this event. It has made our departure from this world, not a translation, but a death.

Yet surely the departure, simply considered, is not to be regarded as an ordination of God's wrath, but of his infinite goodness. Whatever is universal and unavoidable must always be held to be good. Sin only, the choice of man, is essentially evil. Events, laws, the ordinances of God, are ever good. When we approach the dwelling where death has entered, when we join the circle of mourning friends and kindred, over which the mortal stroke has just brought its stupifying horror or its heart-rending agony, when that solemn silence, that dread vacuity of death is around us, broken only by the sighs and shudderings of grief and despair, we are apt at first to feel as if we stood in some awful chasm where God is not, or in some overshadowing cloud where he is present only in displeasure. But when we remember that this is the inevitable lot, that there are thousands of such scenes passing every hour on earth, ten thousand human hearts rent with like sorrow, we are ready to ask —

Can this universal fate be otherwise than an ordination of wisdom and goodness? Can the unvarying allotment, to which all the creatures, to which all the children of God are subject, be vindictive? Can that, which befalls all earthly beings, fills all time, and spreads before the eye of Heaven such an uninterrupted scene — can it be a signal measure of God's wrath? The catastrophe, in the darkest view of it, would not be so horrible as the supposition which thus explains it.

Besides, a dissolution of the body, and a departure from this world, results from the very nature and necessity of things. The human frame is not made to live always, and the earth as evidently was not designed to support the accumulating generations of mankind. Nay, more; departure at some time or other from this life, so far from being a penal requisition, must to every reflecting mind appear in the highest degree desirable. Let the question be put to our calmer and loftier reflections, and there can be no other answer. *Would* we live always? Would we always bear the burden of imperfection and infirmity? Would we always pant for knowledge and happiness that we cannot attain; and shall we ever cling to that load of flesh and of all the ills that flesh is heir to, which drags us down to the earth? No; we would die; we would depart; we would be released and be at rest. We might desire to mount on the winged chariot of Elijah; but it has pleased God to appoint for us a different way. Be it so, that it is for our sins, or that our sins have cast a shadow over the passage out of this world; shall we not then the more humbly and submissively yield ourselves to it? — not with terror, not

with slavish dread, for God does not chasten, even for our sins, in unpitying wrath, but in tender mercy.

We would not then live always. Earth could not bear us. Humanity could not bear its load. Still more; the mind could not be satisfied. It would ask for other scenes, for other regions, for other sources of knowledge, for other fountains of joy. We would depart, then; and this is but saying, that we would die. We must yield our powers to the sleep of death, that we may awake to a new life. We must change the form and mode of our existence, that we may exist in a higher sphere. We must cease to live as men, that we may begin to live as angels. The unsightly worm must sink to inaction and death, that it may rise from its grovelling in the dust, that it may become an inhabitant of the air, that it may unfold its wings in a new region, and become the creature of life and beauty that God designed it to be. The soul in like manner must drop its 'mortal coil,' that the now undeveloped, the half dormant powers, that mysteriously sleep within it, may awake to their own intellectual and immortal life. It may be as unconscious now of what it is hereafter to become, as the reptile that crawls upon the earth is of rising to the air and light of heaven. The transformation may be as great, and as much more glorious, as intellect is more glorious than dark and blind instinct. Nor may death be the soul's last transformation. 'There shall be no more death," indeed; but there may be many changes in its mode of being, while it is passing from glory to glory, through its everlasting progress.

But we must not delay longer to consider some of those views of death, which are indeed more just than

those already noticed, but which nevertheless are liable to be wrested into error, through the excessive dread which is entertained of this event. Mortality is not the interruption of being, nor is it any peculiar visitation of God's wrath; but it is still a serious crisis in our existence; and our views of it are not likely to be too serious, if we will only guard our seriousness from superstition, and from all irrational and extravagant influences of the imagination.

Death is a serious event; inasmuch as we are taught that 'after death is the judgment.' With regard to the formalities of that judgment, if it can be supposed that there are any formalities, we know nothing. The passages in scripture which speak of a throne and a tribunal, or which speak of the soul as *meeting* its Judge after death, are evidently figurative, and teach us only the general truth, that there is a solemn and strict retribution awaiting us. We cannot *meet* the universal presence in which we ever are; in which we are now as truly as we ever can be, though we may be hereafter more conscious of it; and we cannot reasonably suppose that the soul is to be called to any literal bar. But there will be a trial of conscience, under circumstances which will give to conscience all its power; and if we could understand what that must be, we should feel that no formalities could add to the fearfulness of that coming hour. It will be enough to leave the sinful man alone with his conscience, to strip him of all the blinding delusions of sense and passion, to strip him of all this world's distinctions, and all its treacherous maxims, and its supporting example and its flattering countenance, to throw aside every screen and veil of self-deception, and

to empower memory in that all-searching light to call from oblivion every past misdeed, every erring thought, every guilty passion, and every secret and disguised offence; and this, we believe, is the judgment that shall be, in the presence of God and of conscience, after death. Men may do wrong now, and boast of it, may purpose evil and glory in its accomplishment, may oppress and injure, and silence the voice of remonstrance; but an hour of unveiled retribution is approaching them; the time is near when every evil gratification and unjust deed shall become a piercing arrow of conviction.—Forms, appearances, shall soon give place to realities; the body's enslaving control, to the spirit's action and life; and passion, indulgence, sin, to the manifested and the no longer mistaken judgment of Heaven.

There is a passage in the memoirs of a distinguished author, which we confess strikes us, whenever we read it, with nothing less than the profoundest awe. He mentions an individual, who, though entirely unlearned and ignorant, was accustomed in fits of insanity to repeat with great fluency long passages from Latin and Hebrew writers. The phenomenon drew much attention, and was thought by some to be capable of no other explanation, than that of referring it to demoniacal possession. After much inquiry it was ascertained, that this individual had in early life resided in the family of a learned clergyman, who was accustomed to read and repeat aloud passages from his favorite authors; and the excitement of insanity had quickened the slumbering memory of the hearer to recall, with such amazing distinctness, the faded and forgotten images of past impressions. 'And this,' exclaims the writer, 'this, perchance, is the

dread book of judgment, in whose mysterious language every idle word is recorded! Yea, in the very nature of the living spirit, it may be more possible that heaven and earth should pass away, than that a single act, a single thought, should be loosened or lost from that living chain of causes,' which has formed the abiding character of the soul.*

Still however, solemn and justly solemn as this view of death and of the revelation of a future life is, it is possible to lay too great, or at least too exclusive, a stress upon that event which is to unfold to us those revelations. Every future moment — not that of death only, not that of the judgment which is immediately to follow — but every future moment of our being is to answer for every present moment. This is the great law of retribution. None less strict, or less severe belongs to our moral nature. And it does not apply to the future life only, but equally to the present; and all the difference is, that it is now less clearly seen and felt. And it does not apply to any one epoch alone, but to all the periods, to all the moments of our endless being. It is not death then that we should fear, but the eternal retribution of conscience. It is not at the moment of death that we should tremble, but at every moment of the future that is to answer for the neglects, and errors, and offences of the misspent past. Virtue is deathless. It is more; it is blessed life. On the 'path of the just, that shineth brighter and brighter,' no shadow abideth. The shade of death itself but opens the way to a brighter and more glorious existence. Nay, we must declare a stricter doctrine than this. Virtue *alone* is thus deathless. He who

* Biographia Literaria, Chap. VI.

will not obey the great moral laws of his nature, he who lives in hostility to his conscience and in estrangement from his God, can have nothing said to him to mitigate his fears of the mortal hour. He must fear it; he must in reason fear every future hour, and every future scene. If hell is dreadful to the sinful man, heaven would be more dreadful; if the company of evil beings can yield him no joy, the society of heavenly beings would fill him with despite and agony. Whither shall he flee? Where shall he go to escape fear or misery, whose present courses are raising up enemies in every future habit, feeling, and remembrance of his soul? Whither, did we say? Alas! it is not time or place only, it is not circumstance or situation, it is not the revealing light or the overshadowing darkness; but it is himself, that he has made an enemy and an avenger more dreadful than death!

Again; death is the separation of friends. And we are not of those, who can speak lightly of this separation. We have heard of some who were able to lift up a radiant and almost smiling countenance over the earthly remains of all that was dearest on earth; but it enters not into our conception to regard it as anything but extravagance and enthusiasm. We do not take upon us to set limits to the support which God may give to bereaved friendship or afflicted piety; but that triumph in the countenance, surely, is not their fit demeanor. No; the sundering stroke of death is stern, and cold, and bitter reality.

We have sometimes ventured to wonder, and that in the more fervent meditation upon God's goodness, why the trial is made so severe, and for a time so almost in-

consolable. Could one glimpse, we have been ready to say, could one glimpse of the future world be opened to us, could the situation of the departed for one moment be made known to us; or might it have been the order of providence that families should be removed at once and together to the 'spirit land' — but reflection and faith have soon arisen to check the remonstrances and questionings of anxious and yearning affection, and have soon shown, as they usually do, that God's providence is wiser than our own hasty presumption. Were families removed together, how certainly would our social affections gather up and concentrate themselves upon those narrow circles, and all the evils — the peculiarities, the prejudices, the selfish and exclusive attachments — of that limited intercourse, to which we are already sufficiently liable, would be inflicted on society; and all the benefits of a wide and generous diffusion and reciprocation of sentiments and feelings would be cut off from the social body. If, again, the future world were opened to us, it might produce in us an utter distaste to this; it might disturb the well balanced and wisely ordered influences, under which we were made to act in the present state. If we could see, what we so ardently long to behold, beyond this veil of earthly shadows, we might have no eyes for the scene around us; we might be rapt in meditation, when we are called to the action and trial of all our virtues.

It was evidently designed, that we should be trained up here, by a severe and lofty discipline, for some glorious state of being and enjoyment hereafter. The moral economy under which we are placed, the spiritual life on earth, was not designed to be vision, but faith, — not

rapture, but trial. The departure of friends and kindred to another world irresistibly draws our thoughts thither, and constantly renders us more indifferent to acquisitions and objects here. Heaven claims our treasures, that our hearts may be there also. Faith, moreover, in the invisible, the spiritual, the eternal, is the appropriate faith of beings whose welfare lies in the invisible mind, whose nature is spiritual, and whose destiny immortal. It is meet that we should be trained by the influences of a world which we see not, and from which no sound reaches us. It is our happiness, also, not only to love God, but to love him with the fervor and assurance of perfect trust. Love is ever doubtful, without that trial — and it is but an impassioned feeling, without that quality — of absolute confidence.

Yet a little while therefore are we required to wait, till we can behold those objects and those beings, on whom, next to God, it is right that our hearts should be set. The interval will not be too long for the trial of our faith, and the preparation of all our virtues; not too long to prepare us for the blessedness of a future life; nay, it may not be found too long to prepare us *to die*, as the Christian should die. To meet the last hour calmly, to resign all the objects which our senses have made familiar and dear, in the lofty expectation of better things for the mind, is itself a great act of faith, and one for which many day's reflection and experience may not be too much to prepare us. To take our last look at the countenances of beloved friends and companions; to close our eyes to the bright vision of nature; to bid adieu to earth, sky, waters; to feel, for the last time, the thrill of rapture with which this fair and glorious scene of things

has so often touched the soul — this is an hour for faith unshaken in the immortality of virtue, and for trust unbounded in the love of God, and for the triumphant assurance which long tried and lofty experience alone can give. The feelings of the infidel Rousseau have seemed to us thus far natural, and such as even a Christian may entertain. When he apprehended that his last hour drew near, he desired the windows of his apartment to be opened, that he might 'have the pleasure,' as he said, 'of beholding nature once more. How lovely she is!' he exclaimed; 'how pure and serene is the day! O Nature! thou art grand indeed!'* Yet not as Rousseau died, does the Christian die; but with a better trust.

And with that trust, with a firm confidence in the perpetuity of all pious and virtuous friendships, there is much, surely, to mitigate the pain of a temporary separation. Let us remember too, that we do submit to frequent separations in this life, that our friends wander from us over trackless waters and to far distant continents, and that we are still happy in the assurance that they live. And though, by the same providence of God that has guarded them here, they are called to pass beyond the visible precincts of this present existence, let us feel that they still live. God's universe is not explored, when we have surveyed islands, and oceans, and the shores of earth's spreading continents. There are other regions, where the footsteps of the happy and immortal are treading the paths of life. Would we call them back to these abodes of infirmity and sin? Would we involve them again in these toils, and pains, and temptations? Or shall we sorrow for them, as those who have no hope?

* Grimm's Correspondence.

No; we would rather go, and die with them. What do we say? We will rather go, and live with them forever!

But, the awful entrance to the world of spirits — may still be our exclamation — how dark and desolate is that passage! It is a fearful thing to die. Nature abhors dissolution.

Let something of this be admitted, but let it not be too much. Does nature abhor dissolution? Behold the signs of decay and dissolution which the season now spreads around us. Behold nature in her annual death — the precursor of renovated life. But we will not argue from emblems. We will admit that a living being must naturally dread to part with life. But he dreads to part with life, only in a greater measure, as he dreads to part with everything that is his. He is averse to the loss of property, and in some instances almost as much so as to the loss of life itself. He is reluctant to part with any one of his senses; and this reluctance, compared with the natural dread of death, is in full proportion to the value of that organ. Let us rationally look at the subject in this light. Doubtless we dread the loss of the sense of hearing, for instance; and, when that is entirely gone from us hearing is dead. We dread the loss of sight; and, that light extinguished, seeing is dead. Thus one faculty after another departs from us, and death is at work within us, while we say that we are in the midst of life. So let us regard it. So let us familiarize to our minds the thoughts of death, and feel that this dreaded enemy, dreaded partly because imagined to be so distant and unknown, has already made its lodgment in our frame, and by familiar processes is approaching the citadel of life. As disease is making its

inroads upon us and the system is wearing out, as the acuteness of sensation is failing us, and the vigor of bone and muscle is declining, let us say and feel, that we are gradually approaching the extinction of this animal life. Let no skeptic doubts, let no thoughts of annihilation mingle with our apprehensions of mortality; let us believe as Christians, that not the soul, but only the body dies — and death cannot be that dread and abhorrence of nature which we make it.

We fear that we have occasion to crave the patience of our readers for the length to which our discussion has run; but we would dwell upon this point a moment longer — the natural dread of death. It seems to us strange, it seems as if all were wrong, in a world, where from the very constitution of things death must close every scene of human life, where it has reigned for ages over all generations, where the very air we breathe and the dust we tread upon was once animated life — it seems to us most strange and wrong, that this most common, necessary, expedient, and certain of all events should bring such horror and desolation with it; that it should bring such tremendous agitation, as if it were some awful and unprecedented phenomenon; that it should be more than death — a shock, a catastrophe, a convulsion; as if nature, instead of holding on its steady course, were falling into irretrievable ruins.

And that which is strange, is our strangeness to this event. Call sickness, we repeat, call pain, an approach to death. Call the weariness and failure of the limbs and senses, call decay, a dying. It is so; it is a gradual loosening of the cords of life, and a breaking up of its reservoirs and resources. So shall they all, one and

another in succession, give way. 'I feel' — will the thoughtful man say — 'I feel the pang of suffering, as it were piercing and cutting asunder, one by one, the fine and invisible bonds that hold me to the earth. I feel the gushing current of life within me to be wearing away its own channels. I feel the sharpness of every keen emotion and of every acute and far-penetrating thought, as if it were shortening the moments of the soul's connexion and conflict of the body.' So it is, and so shall it be, till at last, 'the silver cord is loosened, and the golden bowl is broken, and the pitcher is broken at the fountain, and the wheel is broken at the cistern, and the dust returns to the earth as it was, and the spirit returns unto God who gave it.'

No; it is not a strange dispensation. Death is the fellow of all that is earthly; the friend of man alone. It is not an anomaly; it is not a monster in the creation. It is the law, and the lot of nature.

'Not to thy eternal resting-place,
Shalt thou retire alone. * * *
Thou shalt lie down
With patriarchs of the infant world, with kings,
The powerful of the earth, the wise and good,
Fair forms and hoary seers of ages past,
All in one mighty sepulchre. The hills,
Rock-ribbed and ancient as the sun; the vales,
Stretching in pensive quietness between;
The venerable woods, rivers that move
In majesty, and the complaining brooks,
That make the meadows green, and poured round all,
Old ocean's grey and melancholy waste —
Are but the solemn decorations all
Of the great tomb of man.'

But of what is it the tomb? Does the spirit die? Do the blessed affections of the soul go down into the dark and silent grave? Oh! no. 'The narrow house, and pall, and breathless darkness' and funereal train — these belong not to the soul. They proclaim only the body's dissolution. They but celebrate the vanishing away of the shodow of existence. Man does not die, though the forms of popular speech thus announce his exit. He does not die. We bury, not our friend, but only the form, the vehicle in which for a time our friend lived. That cold, impassive clay is not the friend, the parent, the child, the companion, the cherished being. No, it is not: blessed be God, that we can say, *It is not!* It is the material mold only that earth claims. It is 'dust only,' that 'descends to dust.' The grave! let us break its awful spell, its dread dominion. It is the place where man lays down his weakness, his infirmity, his diseases and sorrows, that he may rise up to a new and glorious life. It is the place where man ceases — in all that is frail and decaying — ceases to be man, that he may be, in glory and blessedness, an angel of light!

Why, then, should we fear death, save as the wicked fear, and must fear it? Why dread to lay down this frail body in its resting-place, and this weary, aching head on the pillow of its repose? Why tremble at this — that in the long sleep of the tomb that body shall suffer disease no more, and pain no more, and hear no more the cries of want nor the groans of distress — and, far retired from the turmoil of life, that violence and change shall pass lightly over it, and the elements shall beat and the storms shall sigh unheard around its lowly

bed? Say, ye aged and infirm! is it the greatest of evils to die? Say, ye children of care and toil! say, ye afflicted and tempted! is it the greatest of evils to die?

Oh! no. Come the last hour, in God's own time! — and a good life and a glorious hope shall make it welcome. Come the hour of release! — and affliction shall make it welcome. Come the hour of reunion with the loved and lost on earth! — and the passionate yearnings of affection, and the strong aspiration of faith, shall bear us to their blessed land. Come death to this body — this burdened, tempted, frail, failing, dying body! — and to the soul, — thanks be to God who giveth us the victory, — to the soul come freedom, light and joy unceasing! come the immortal life! 'He that liveth' — saith the Conqueror over death — 'he that liveth and believeth in me, shall NEVER DIE!'